

Readings for the 26th Thursday of the Year

FIRST READING: Nehemiah 8:1-4a, 5-6, 7b-12

A reading from the Book of Nehemiah:

The whole people gathered as one in the open space before the Water Gate, and they called upon Ezra the scribe to bring forth the book of the law of Moses which the LORD prescribed for Israel. On the first day of the seventh month, therefore, Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, which consisted of men, women, and those children old enough to understand. Standing at one end of the open place that was before the Water Gate, he read out of the book from daybreak until midday, in the presence of the men, the women, and those children old enough to understand; and all the people listened attentively to the book of the law. Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the occasion. He opened the scroll so that all the people might see it (for he was standing higher up than any of the people); and, as he opened it, all the people rose. Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people, their hands raised high, answered, "Amen, amen!" Then they bowed down and prostrated themselves before the LORD, their faces to the ground. As the people remained in their places, Ezra read plainly from the book of the law of God, interpreting it so that all could understand what was read. Then Nehemiah, that is, His Excellency, and Ezra the priest-scribe and the Levites who were instructing the people said to all the people: "Today is holy to the LORD your God. Do not be sad, and do not weep"—for all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law. He said further: "Go, eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks, and allot portions to those who had nothing prepared; for today is holy to our LORD. Do not be saddened this day, for rejoicing in the LORD must be your strength!" And the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Hush, for today is holy, and you must not be saddened." Then all the people went to eat and drink, to distribute portions, and to celebrate with great joy, for they understood the words that had been expounded to them.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 11

The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul; The decree of the LORD is trustworthy, giving wisdom to the simple.

The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The command of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eye;

The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; The ordinances of the LORD are true, all of them just.

The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

They are more precious than gold, than a heap of purest gold; Sweeter also than syrup or honey from the comb.

Gospel: Luke 10:1-12

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Jesus appointed seventy-two other disciples whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit. He said to them, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest. Go on your way; behold, I am sending you like lambs among wolves. Carry no money bag, no sack, no sandals; and greet no one along the way. Into whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this household.' If a peaceful person lives there, your peace will rest on him; but if not, it will return to you. Stay in the same house and eat and drink what is offered to you, for the laborer deserves his payment. Do not move about from one house to another. Whatever town you enter and they welcome you, eat what is set before you, cure the sick in it and say to them, 'The Kingdom of God is at hand for you.' Whatever town you enter and they do not receive you, go out into the streets and say, 'The dust of your town that clings to our feet, even that we shake off against you.' Yet know this: the Kingdom of God is at hand. I tell you, it will be more tolerable for Sodom on that day than for that town."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 26th Thursday of the Year

This morning we have an example of Jewish liturgy. There are prayers, scripture readings, presiders and an actively participating congregation. I have always wondered why all the people wept. In my cynicism, I have wondered if the length of the service and location of worship has something to do with the people's affect. Sunup to noon is, after all, six hours and in the sun. In Palestine, it's dry, hot and sunscreen was yet to be invented. Who knows, I'd weep too.

However, these were people who returned home to the Promised Land, having lived for generations among pagans in foreign countries. Perhaps their tears were of joy, not sorrow. Nehemiah was the appointed governor and Ezra was High Priest. For us, religious feasts are church events. Although liturgy was involved here, the feast was for the benefit of the entire community and involved eating and drinking. Today, Jewish feasts begin and end with liturgical services but last for eight days. The context for today's feast seems to be thanksgiving for returning home, having never been there before.

A good friend of mine was a priest in Santa Fe, MN. He was pastor of the oldest parish in the state founded in the late 1500s, St. John the Baptist in Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo. The pueblo had two patronal feast days, Epiphany, which was a tribal celebration and the feast of the Baptist's birth, which was the religious one. I've been there for them at least twice. Epiphany began with mass and the commissioning of the tribal elders. The feast of John the Baptist also began with mass and a blessing of the tribe. They then took to the pueblo and spread throughout all the homes. People prepared for days for this feast. There were games for the kids, tribal dancing and tribal singing. Members of the tribe living elsewhere returned home for these days. The home-cooked food we shared in people's homes was savory. I can imagine the ancient Jewish communal feasts to have been like this.

This may have been a bitter-sweet celebration too. Even though not all the people of Israel have returned and undoubtedly many of those people were their family members, they were grateful for what they had, a new and ancient home. Perhaps their tears were for their people who remained in the countries, town and cities that had become their homes. Rich food and drink would never be able to replace them but it could ease their sense of loss like a parting glass.

The gospel, however, is not about a homecoming. Jesus prepared seventy two disciples to be sent out on mission. These seventy two people were the first missionaries in the name of Jesus. The Greek word for missionary is apostle. These seventy two apostles went to prepare the way for Jesus upcoming mission. They went to all the places Jesus intended to visit. Perhaps they were to test the waters to see how amenable the people would be to Jesus when he arrived. This showed that Jesus had a defined plan of evangelization and did not just drop in on people unannounced. Travel was by foot and with an entourage and no simple operation. Preparing the places also would have involved advertizing. Did they post flyers?

Jesus advice to them, travel light, accept offered hospitality and remain in one place while working showed that Jesus was practical and had good sense. Hospitality is deeply imbedded in Middle Eastern culture. I can't imagine housing and feeding a pair of traveling evangelists in my home. Jesus also gave good advice to deal with possible rejection. Don't take it personally; don't be wounded by it. Let it go as you exit the town. It may be testimony against the town but it allowed the minister to admit and release the rejection and continue the mission. This was more important for the seventy two for the unwelcoming town's people didn't care.

What can we glean from these readings? From Nehemiah, live in the present and be thankful for the experience. Be aware of God's presence which is God's blessing. We can all be grateful when we do that. From Luke, enjoy the people who are near and don't hold on to burdens and pain. Acknowledge the feelings, let them go and offer them to Jesus. Our journey to the Kingdom continues.

May gratitude give life.

James D. Beath

September 30, 2021